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## George MacDonald's Boyhood in Huntly

Sir Edward Troup KCB KCVO

**G**eorge MacDonald was born on 10th December, 1824, in the house in Duke Street, now converted into shops, on the front of which a plaque commemorates the event. Adjoining it, at the corner of Church Street, is the house where lived his grandmother, the wonderful old lady who, under the name of Mrs. Falconer, is portrayed to the life in the story of *Robert Falconer*. If one stands before this house and looks along Church Street one sees, just as Robert Falconer did, the Tap-o-Noth, "one blue truncated peak in the distance."

When George MacDonald's father occupied this house in Duke Street, the two houses were connected by a door and a short stair, which in the book gave the scene for the dramatic incident when Robert in the dead of night beheld an "angel unawares." This door, which had long been closed and boarded up, was to be seen during repairs to the house a few years ago.

Readers of *Robert Falconer* will remember that the book opens with Robert's recollections of his father's last mysterious visit to his grandmother. Such an incident actually occurred in the house in Church Street, and George MacDonald had just such recollections of it from his early boyhood. His father had by that time moved away from Huntly to The Farm, but one Sunday, George, still a little boy, had been left with the old grandmother while the rest of the family went to church and when he came home to dinner he told them excitedly how a strange man had suddenly come into the house without knocking, had bolted the door of the room where the grandmother sat, had been closeted with her for a long time, and had gone as mysteriously as he had come. The strange man was his uncle—not, of course, his father as in the story.

George MacDonald was only two years old when his father left Huntly and moved to The Farm (on the outskirts of the town), where he and his brother James (my grandfather) brought up their families in one house.

**[end of page 4] [5] [Note: image not available]** Huntly was then a little town of thatched cottages with only a few two-storey slated houses in the Square and adjoining streets. George MacDonald's original title for *Alec Forbes* was "The Little Grey Town," which was altered on the demand of his publishers. There was then no railway of course, and as you entered by

the Aberdeen Road over the stone bridge, you had the same pleasant view as now of the River Bogie and its weirs, but instead of the unsightly factory there was a thatched Mill with an open water-wheel. On the other side was the thatched cottage where in the story Tibbie Dyster was drowned. There was no Free Kirk and the Parish Kirk stood by itself, a gaunt square block with not even a tree near it. The old “stannin stanes” were the only structure in the Square and, where the Gordon Schools now stand, there was nothing but a gateway, the entrance to the “policies” of Huntly Lodge, occupied after the death of the last Duke of Gordon by his widow, the famous evangelical duchess.

In this little town, George MacDonald the elder, with his brother James, succeeded their father Charles Edward MacDonald as manufacturers, bleachers, millers and farmers. Their factory, disused even in George MacDonald’s boyhood and pulled down only a year or two ago, stood in MacDonald Street. It was here that Robert Falconer came to play the fiddle which his grandmother, in her ruthless puritanism, consigned to the fire. Their Mill you will see standing beside the upper bridge of Bogie (then only a wooden foot bridge) and the haugh below the bridge was their bleachfield. In those days they had Agents in every part of Scotland, who sent linen to be bleached in the water of the Bogie until this trade was killed by the introduction of chemicals for bleaching.

Just beyond this bridge the brothers built and in 1826 occupied the house which was originally called Bleachfield Cottage, and then for very many years The Farm. It was George MacDonald’s home in childhood and boyhood, and in the summers between his sessions at college—and he visited it many times after he had settled in England.

Its aspect in those days was different from what it is now. It stood solid and bare on two acres of waste land and unsheltered by [6] trees. The trees now shading it were all brought over from Huntly in bundles on the back of George’s elder brother Charles. The Farm buildings a few hundred yards further, were, as even I can remember them, a group of low thatched houses. But at least no hard line of railway cut the meadows that sloped to the Bogie and “the broom bloomed bonny” on the brae behind the house. He himself has described the place:—

Behind my father’s house there lies  
A little grassy brae,  
Whose face my childhood’s busy feet  
Ran often up in play,

Whence on the chimneys I looked down  
 In wonderment alway.  
 Around the house where'er I turned,  
 Great hills closed up the view:  
 The town midst their converging roots  
 Was clasped by rivers two:  
 From one hill to another sprang  
 The sky's great arch of blue.  
 It was joy to climb their sides,  
 And in the heather lie:  
 The bridle on my arm did hold  
 The pony feeding by:  
 Beneath, the silvery streams: above,  
 The white clouds in the sky.<sup>1</sup>

The essential truth of George MacDonald's boyhood will be found in *Ranald Bannerman* and in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*—not that, save in a few instances, actual incidents are related: but if you will regard Ranald and Alec as George MacDonald in boyhood, you will know what atmosphere he lived in, what were the conditions and outward circumstances of his life, and what were the influences that formed his character.

Most potent of all those influences was his father's, of whom he wrote:—

. . . . Once more I paced the fields  
 With him whose love had made me long for God—  
 So good a father that, needs-must, I sought  
 A better still, Father of him and me.<sup>2</sup>

1. These verses are a very different version of *The Hills* from that published (Poetical Works Vol II p. 3) and also (though rather less so) from the altered MS version in the Manchester Public Library.

2. *A Story of the Seashore*—*Poetical Works* Vol I p. 171 1.21-24 [7]

But, for the moment, I am concerned with events and outward conditions. One event that left a deep impression when he was five years old, was the flood of '29—the story of which is told in *Alec Forbes*. It carried away the wooden bridge by his father's Mill, though of course the rescue of Annie Anderson from the flooded cottage and the destruction of the stone bridge are fiction. Thomas Cran who told Alec to save the drowning woman at the risk

of going to hell—"Better be damned, doing the will o' God, than saved doin' naething"—was a real well-known character—James Maitland by name.

There were two Schools in Huntly then—the parish school and a private or "adventure" school, conducted by one Colin Stewart. The story of the fights between the two schools, chiefly stone throwing (like the fights in later days between "rats" and "nons") is told in *Ranald Bannerman*. George MacDonald attended the "adventure" school—and the harsh and cruel character of the teacher is no wise mis-represented in the Murdoch Malison of *Alec Forbes*, though most of the incidents in the school story are fictitious. The late Mrs. James Lawson however used to say that it was she who escaped through the school window and brought "white breid" to the boys who were "keepit in."

I do not know when or how George MacDonald left this school but he soon found a very different master in Mr. Alexander Millar, afterwards minister of the U.P. Church in Huntly. He was not only a kindly and capable teacher, but discovered and encouraged his pupil's literary ability.

George MacDonald's chief recreation—there were no organized games in those days—was riding. There was a white mare, named "Missy," whose memory was affectionately cherished by all at The Farm even in my childhood; and, when she was not wanted for business journeys in the gig, he was free to ride her where he pleased.

Once on a day, my cousin Frank and I  
Sat swiftly borne behind the dear white mare  
That oft had carried me in bygone days  
Along the lonely paths of Moorland hills.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. *A Story of the SeaShore* (*Poetical Works* Vol I p. 172) [8]

The moorland hills were, I imagine, the Clashmach, the Foudlans and the Gartly hills—perhaps also the Binn, then still moorland.

For their holidays the family went sometimes to the Cabrach, oftener to one of the coast towns—usually Cullen.

. . . . Each year  
We turned our backs upon the ripening corn  
And sought some village on the Moray shore.<sup>4</sup>

A letter he wrote from Cullen when he was about twelve, shows that his ambition was then to be a sailor—and throughout life he retained his love for the sea.

Cullen and the Cabrach each became later the scene of a story. Cullen is the Portlossie of *Malcolm* and of the *Marquis of Lassie*—and, on one of his rare visits to Huntly in later life, my uncle James MacDonald drove him through the Cabrach so that he might refresh his memory of places before writing *Castle Warlock*.

I do not know of any writer the scenes of whose boyhood were so deeply impressed on him, and are so closely associated with his best work. In his English novels he wrote of course of English country scenes, but never I think with the same love as of Scotland: and when he writes of Scotland, one always feels it is Aberdeenshire or Banff or Moray—never the Western Highlands or the South. He lived for many years in Italy and wrote some of his best books there, but he never laid the scene of any story in Italy, and only once (in *A Rough Shaking*) the scene of a brief episode. The scenes of *Sir Gibbie* which was written in Italy, lie all in Deeside.

His son Greville tells us that once, when the conversation with a friend had turned on the wonderful colour of Southern skies and seas, he said: “Yes, they are splendid! But I have only to close my eyes and I see a bit of grey rock and great clouds in a deep blue sky, and the wind blowing over the golden whins which the English call gorse.”